

111. Speeches 101
SPEECH

12.

OF

ISAAC E. MORSE, OF LOUISIANA,

ON THE

TERRITORIAL BILL.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 24, 1849.

WASHINGTON:

JOHN T. TOWERS, PRINTER.

1849.

SPEECH.

Mr. CHAIRMAN: With a just appreciation of the importance of the motion, I shall move, at a proper time, to strike out the first section of this bill. I shall do so because it contains among other objectionable features, "*the Wilmot Proviso*."

Sir, an eminent British statesman, speaking of him whose portrait hangs on your right, and who was emphatically first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, said in substance, that in all future time the progress of civilization would be marked by the respect in which the memory of Washington was held. Of all the eulogiums ever pronounced upon the Father of his Country, this, to me, seems the noblest tribute to the virtues of the sage of Mount Vernon. And yet we, who should be the first to appreciate his character, and the last to forget his injunctions, at this day, aye in this hour, when not fifty years have elapsed since his death, we have seen a party organized upon sectional grounds, with an ex-President (Mr. VAN BUREN) at its head, and the grandson of Washington's Vice President, and the son of the sixth President, presented to the people of the United States for the two highest offices in the gift of the American people.

The great mind of Washington looked far into the future, and knowing that nothing but sectional jealousies could ever weaken or destroy this great Republic, solemnly warned the people against them. The friends of Free Soil, as they have styled themselves, in endeavoring to carry out their views and elevate Mr. Van Buren to the Presidency, based his pretensions upon three or four grounds, each one of which is untenable, and as false as the claim of that party to the name they bear. I shall proceed briefly to examine them in detail:

1st. It has been said throughout the entire North, and often reiterated upon this floor, that Mr. Van Buren was sacrificed in 1840 by the slave States, or as it is sometimes said by the slave power. Let the facts speak for themselves; at that election Mr. Van Buren received only about sixty votes, and of that number five-sixths were from the slaveholding States. Old Virginia, always true to her principles, voted for him in opposition to Harrison and Tyler, both of whom were her native sons, while New York, Pennsylvania, and the entire North and West, with the exception of New Hampshire and Illinois, I believe voted for his opponent.

2d. That slavery gives some imaginary political advantages to the Southern or slaveholding States in the Confederacy; and the evidence adduced in support of this position is, that we of the South, though numerically in a minority of some forty-eight or fifty votes, taking the representation on this floor or in the electoral college, have monopolized an undue proportion of the highest offices of the country, from the President down. The answer to this is equally simple and I trust satisfactory. At present the slave population of

the South is represented on this floor by only three-fifths of their numbers; if the slaves were freed to-morrow, which we could do, and not give them any of the political rights, (and we should only be following the example of all, or nearly all, of the free States,) we would instantly increase our representation nearly two-fifths. If we can manage to secure so many of the best offices with a representation of three-fifths, of course, with a full representation of *five-fifths*, our chances would be by so much the more increased.

3d. With a charity that looks to the good of their neighbors, and disclaiming any sympathy with the slaves, other gentlemen desire to take from us this great sin, which, while it offends them, degrades, demoralizes, and degenerates the white race. The answer to this is found in the continued complaints that are made of our exerting so much influence and holding so large a proportion of the offices, &c. If we are so fast degenerating, and losing all our wealth and population, how happens it, gentlemen of the North, that we of the South have held so many of the distinguished places, and, as regards the Presidential office, in nearly every case by the votes of a large majority of the free States. That is the true secret of your objection to slavery. You see the truth of the fact of our citizens having been so often selected to fill these high places, and no other reason occurring, you charge it upon slavery, and are determined to exterminate it from the land. I have not time to digress and point out the causes which have contributed to give to Southern statesmen an advantage over yours of the North. I might perhaps offend your sensitive feelings if I were to enumerate them all.

One system which you have of sending new members to this Hall every two years, without experience, without a knowledge of the routine of business, the rules of the House, has contributed not a little to this result. Why is it that New York and Pennsylvania, with some seventy members, does not exercise as much influence in the politics of the country as Massachusetts and South Carolina? But I have not time to follow out the argument further.

4th. The hostility to the institutions of the South, and the determination to prevent our going with our property into the new Territories, acquired by the common valor and to be paid for by the common treasure, is entertained, because it is urged that it degrades the white labor of the North, and the hardy sons of New England will not go where the white laborer is reduced to the level of the slave.

This is a question of fact, and it is not true. I appeal with entire confidence to any gentleman who has resided in the South, to say whether with us there are any other distinctions but those of color? No, sir; unquestionably, no. There, sir, the mechanic and laborer enjoy the same social privileges with their employers, dine at his table, go with him, often in the same carriage, to the polls or to church. Is it so at the North? Another gentleman (Mr. Wilson) has found the cause of the fancied superiority of the North over the South in the fact that the people of New England are early accustomed to work, to *dig, dig*, until the body and mind acquire a great superiority over the degenerate Southrons. Does the gentleman suppose that we of the South do not labor? let him go to any plantation in Louisiana, and he will find the master at work early and late, and during the sugar-making season, the masters

taking their watch regularly one half of the night to guard against fire and to superintend the manufacture of sugar. That gentleman, with many others, took an occasion to give a fling at Virginia and Kentucky, by comparing them with New York and Pennsylvania, and deducing thence, that the relative diminished representation from those States was attributable entirely to the existence of slavery in the two former of those States. That argument, if it had any force, fell with increased weight upon Massachusetts, a State unsurpassed in wealth, intelligence, and all the great elements that constitute a State. If any argument can be adduced from a diminution of population in any of the States, it is rather one of increasing wealth. A planter in one of our rich States of the South, with a few hundred of acres of land to cultivate, with industry and economy, soon finds himself enabled to buy out one, two, or three of his neighbors, who, in their turn, with the proceeds of their fertile farms, are enabled to purchase in some newer section of the same State, or perhaps in some newer State, three or four times the quantity of land they have parted with, and in a short time are thus able to give to each one of a large family the same quantity of land which they originally owned.

I may say, without the least fear of contradiction, that the borders of the Mississippi for one hundred and fifty miles above and fifty below the city of New Orleans, for fertility of soil and capability of production, are unsurpassed, if equalled by any portion of the globe, not excepting the delta of the Nile; and yet every year the wealthier planters buy out the smaller ones, who with the proceeds of an acre or two fronting on that river, are enabled to get principalities in the newer portions of the country. A friend of mine, Col. Preston, of South Carolina, on a single plantation, has made some two thousand hogsheads of sugar, worth perhaps the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, and as, I believe, he retains his citizenship in South Carolina, there is perhaps not a voter on that large tract of land, unless perhaps his manager, by two years residence in the State and one year in the parish, may have acquired that right. A person less good natured than myself might reply to the gentleman from New Hampshire, and others who have used this argument, that population increased in the barren portions of their country, because the inhabitants can never make enough to move themselves away. But I forbear to press this point further.

Sir, in the search after truth, we are frequently deceived by names, and erroneous conclusions are too frequently drawn from a false statement of the premises. There is something in the term of *Free Soil* that commends itself instantly to the feelings of an American. I am for *free soil*, but not in that miserable, narrow, sectional sense, which makes California and New Mexico free to the inhabitants of every country, of every complexion and religion, but prohibits the people of fifteen of these confederated States, sovereigns themselves, from going there, and carrying with them what property they choose. One half of this confederacy is to say to the other, these Territories, the common property of the whole, to which the South have contributed more of men in proportion to their population to acquire, and will contribute their full proportion of money to pay for, you shall not go there, unless, *now*, beforehand, you will

say that our laws shall go with you, our institutions shall forever prevail; and should the entire country be populated by the South, and not a single Northern man be found there, that you shall never alter or modify the great fundamental law which we think proper to impose upon you.

Now, sir, it is stated very generally that the issue between us is that the South desire to carry slavery to the new Territories, and that the people of the North desire to prevent it. This is not the correct statement of the question. If the South did desire to force slavery on the future inhabitants of that territory, *volens volens*, it could not have the sanction of my voice or vote. I have proved the sincerity of this opinion on the admission of Texas into this Union. It was thought necessary to accomplish that, to have the vote of a gentleman from Tennessee in the other branch of this Congress, that gentleman expressed himself favorable to the measure, provided the slavery question could be settled by the bill. I told that gentleman, as I tell you now, that it is inconsistent with the great principles of republican liberty to force any system of laws upon a people, and that the people of Louisiana, equally interested in this question, did not desire it, nor would not insist upon it. All that we ask is, that the people who go there shall have the right to make such laws as they please. Is this seeking to carry slavery there? Why, when we agree to let the people of the Territories settle this question, can any man, who does not wilfully shut his eyes to the truth, doubt what will be the result? One hundred has gone from the free States, to ten from the slave States at least, and it is thought that both in New Mexico and California, the people have already settled this question against us. If this be so, say these gentlemen, then why object to this proviso. Because, though the chances are as 999 to 1 against us, I will not give up that single chance, because it involves a right, and the taking it away puts an indignity upon us, and makes us the inferiors of the North, a proposition I will never submit to myself, nor subject the people I represent to any implied submission by any act of mine. This Wilmot proviso has not been fairly and sufficiently discussed. I differ from many of my friends in the opinion that the South should never permit any allusion to this question. If in this age of free inquiry, our rights are guaranteed to us by the Constitution, and cannot stand the test of reason and examination, there is no safety from the fanaticism of the day but in resistance.

Hitherto the North has had greatly the advantage by freely discussing this matter at home and here, stating the question in a manner to suit their own peculiar views, while we, relying upon the justice of our position and the compromises of the Constitution, have suffered a morbid kind of public opinion to be manufactured almost unanimously at the North and West, and even in the South a species of indifference is sometimes inferred from our apathy on this vital topic.

Much reliance is placed on the fact that a Southern statesman (Mr. JEFFERSON) drew the celebrated ordinance of '87, the great original proviso. Is it generous, is it fair to turn the liberality of the great mother of States as well as of statesmen, against her who gave you the territory for five or six of the largest States freely, and only

required that fugitive slaves should be surrendered up to their owners? You take the territory but refuse to comply with the conditions. You make it a felony to aid or assist the United States marshal in his endeavor to take the property of a Southern gentleman in some of your States, knowing that the Constitution is imperative and above all your acts, and has been repeatedly so decided by Northern judges on the supreme bench.

Thus much for a law-abiding people. But if the representatives of the South meet, and in a calm and dispassionate manner tell our people the truth, you call us disunionists. Is there a word in the Southern address about dissolving the Union? No, sir, we have told our people of the aggressions on their rights, not only in this Hall, that are daily occurring, but of the enactments in some of the States, and we tell them the remedy is in their hands. If they choose quietly to submit, it is their business, not mine. My constituents shall never have it in their power to say—

“I was the juggling friend that never spoke before,
But cried, I warned you, when the deed was o’er.”

I believe that when this question is fairly and fully presented to the American people, there is still virtue and patriotism left to do us right and save the country. The North has taken a position, and I desire to see what the legislatures of the fifteen Southern States will do; and when they are brought up fairly front to front, it will then be seen whether there is any middle ground of compromise; then true patriots will rise up from the North and the South, and if we are wrong, great and good men will show us why and wherein, as they will do at the North.

Men will never be brought to act under a just responsibility until all the consequences are before them; I venture to say that the Oregon question never would have been settled but for the passage of the twelve months’ notice. Then diplomatists and statesmen looked the matter seriously in the face, and when it was certain that collision would ensue if some amicable determination was not made of the question, the question was settled fairly and honorably, and that settlement has been approved of and acquiesced in by the country.

I say that I have an abiding confidence in the good sense of our people North, South, East, and West. I am confirmed in this by the recent vote in the Presidential election, notwithstanding the prestige which surrounded the free soil candidate for the Presidency; in spite of his talents, which are of no ordinary character, to the eternal honor of the American people, he did not receive one *solitary electoral vote* for the Presidency. I commend to some of his near friends who charged General CASS with distracting the Democratic party, the propriety of doing what was urged upon the Democratic candidate to do, to collect some evidence that he had been a candidate for the Presidency—no record existing of the fact of MARTIN VAN BUREN’S having been a candidate in ’48. It would be well for the friends and admirers of that gentleman to get some of the little oral testimony that may yet be found, to establish the fact, as a curious (though, perhaps, unimportant) one in the history of political parties in the United States.

A gentleman from Ohio, (Mr. Root,) universally known for his

urbanity in and out of this House, took occasion to reply to that part of the eloquent speech of the gentleman from Virginia, (Gov. McDOWELL,) in which he alluded so beautifully to the ancestors of the people of the North and the South as the Cavaliers and Round Heads, and with more of ingenuity than fairness, endeavored so to warp the allusion, as to wish to impress upon the people of the North, that the argument of the gentlemen from Virginia was, that because the puritans were accustomed to self-denial they must yield to the arrogant pretensions of the South. This attempt to prevent the beautiful allusion of the gentleman from Virginia to raise sectional jealousies, was unbecoming and inconsistent with the usual fairness of the gentleman from Ohio, (Mr. ROOT.)

Upon the debate on this vexed question, there has been already too much of crimination and recrimination. Most of the gentlemen from the North who speak on this subject, when warmed by their hostility to the institution of slavery at the South, conceiving some imaginary superiority over the good people of the South, are apt to draw comparisons, which are said by all right thinking men, to be odious. If the fact were so, it would be a legitimate argument as well against the existence as the extension of slavery. It has no foundation in truth, and only can be found in a heated and distempered imagination. In all that gives dignity to man, and distinction among his cotemporaries, and a great name that will survive him, for every one inhabiting the North, as proud a name can be found among the sons of the sunny South; and without mentioning any of the long array of undying names, in science, in letters, in statesmanship and diplomacy, the three individuals who, in the three wars of our country, have shown as much of the Roman *virtus* as any men living or dead, were all men born, educated, and who spent their entire lives, among a slaveholding community, and were slaveholders themselves, the heroes of the three wars, Washington, Jackson, and Taylor.

Mr. Chairman, when in the ardor of debate gentlemen from the South utter sentiments, which, by the by, I approve of in my serious moments, that they prefer disunion to dishonor—that this Union is only valuable when the ends for which it was framed are truly carried out—when instead of being a shield for protection, it becomes a sword to wound, gentlemen rise and pray for its perpetuity as though it possessed some cabalistic influence to secure “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” When the kindly feelings and the enjoyments of equal rights are no longer to be found emanating the hearts of the people, your Union is a rope of sand. I say with the French, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

I shall make no boast of my love for this Union; my ancestors have been planted here for more than two hundred years. I can and do appreciate the immense superiority of our country by a comparison with others. I feel that to be able to say, I am an American citizen, is a prouder boast, and throws around one more of honor and of safety than the claim to be a Roman citizen ever could confer when Rome was the proud mistress of the world. And I say with sincerity, that the union of these free, equal, and confederated States may be perpetual, is the *second* wish of my heart—the *first* is, that the States may forever continue free and equal.